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EMANUEL HALDEMAN-JULIUS AND THE EDUCATION OF THE POOR OF AMERICA

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Abstract

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was born in Philadelphia in 1889, the son of poor Russian immigrants. Emanuel did not achieve much at school and worked in various jobs until he found his niche as a reporter for a variety of socialist newspapers. He married a wealthy heiress, became a publisher and eventually achieved fame and wealth. The cornerstone of his success was producing little blue books selling at five cents each. Eventually he published 500 million copies of these books which the poor were able to buy because of their low price.

It is argued that Haldeman-Julius's publications made a major contribution to the cultural background, both scientific and literary, of the period in the United States of America. His little blue books were bought by children as the cheapest source of information. They were also purchased by working men intent on self advancement. The booklets reflected his general view and that of his authors, being socialist in politics and atheist in religious outlook. They promoted sex education, evolutionary theory and a wide range of excellent literature. However even with Haldeman-Julius's knowledge of and enthusiasm for evolution, he failed to see the demise of the little blue books, which did not change sufficiently over time.

Introduction

Palmer (2003) provided a brief biography of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, starting with his birth on 30 July 1889, to immigrant parents. His parents, David Zolajefsky and Elizabeth Zamustin Zolajefsk arrived in Baltimore in 1887 with two young children (Cothran, 1966, p. 1). Two other children had died; one before they left Odessa; the other dying on the journey to the USA. David Zolajefsky changed the family name to Julius and set himself up as a bookbinder in Philadelphia (Cothran, 1966, p. 1). The family lived frugally, but were never destitute. Emanuel had an unremarkable schooling, left school early, had a variety of different jobs but settled to a career as a reporter with a variety of socialist newspapers. In October 1915, Emanuel Julius was invited to join the editorial staff of a socialist weekly, *The Appeal to Reason*, in Girard, Kansas, at the princely sum of \$25 a week (Haldeman-Julius, 1949, p. 13). On 1 June, 1916, Emanuel Julius married an heiress, Anna Marcet Haldeman, and thereafter Haldeman-Julius became the family name. After the marriage, Haldeman-Julius quit work and lived at Marcet's Cedarville farm in Illinois. He then rejoined the staff of the *Appeal to Reason* and in January 1919 purchased the plant with an advance of \$25,000 from his wife, and a guarantee that he would pay a further \$50,000 within a year. The proprietors of the paper were glad to sell as they were finding it difficult to keep the business going. Emanuel had the idea of producing

pamphlets as a source of income because the socialist weekly was struggling. He may have been led to this idea because he himself had been intellectually stimulated by reading Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as a teenager.

I then went across the street into a small, bare park that covered a block. It was winter and I was cold , but I sat down on a bench and read that booklet straight through, without a halt, and never did I so much as notice that my hands were blue, that my wet nose was numb and that my ears felt as hard as glass. Never until then, or since, did any piece of printed matter move me so deeply.
(Haldeman-Julius quoted Mordell, 1960, p. 28)

An alternative view is that producing low cost books was a suggestion from Marion Wharton from Fort Scott Peoples College, which will be explored later. He also loved *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*; these two books became the first two books of his new series of pamphlets (Anon, 1921; Wilde, 1923). He said: 'Those two booklets are still Nos.1 and 2 in the series. ... They'll be there as long as I have anything to say about the project.' (Haldeman-Julius, 1949, p. 13)

Palmer's earlier paper (Palmer, 2003) explained the progressive changes in the various names of the series as Haldeman-Julius increased sales and profits by lowering the price of the booklets. The series in order of publication were *The Appeal's pocket series*, *the people's pocket series*, *The Appeal pocket series*, *The 10 cent pocket series*, *The 5 cent pocket series*, *The pocket series*, and *The little blue books*. Each of these series lasted for comparatively short periods until the title *The little blue books* which was used from 1923 onwards. As will be explained later, the methods that Haldeman-Julius used to keep prices low, also work against dating individual little blue books accurately. There are a multitude of variations; explanations of these variations can be obtained from a variety of sources. To date little blue books accurately the key source documents are Haldeman-Julius (1928), Johnson and Tanselle (1970) and Gibbs (2004).

Little Blue books

There are approximately two thousand different titles (2121 titles according to Davenport, 2004); these are listed on the Axe Library site (URL: Leonard H Axe Library) and a rather less complete collection at the Kent Library site (URL: Kent Library).

Haldeman-Julius intended that each title should sell ten thousand copies per year and the books were produced from 1919 until 1978 when the printery/warehouse burnt down. Over this time more than 500 million little blue books were sold, mainly by mail order (95% according to Green and Green, 1998, p. 46). The geographical location of Girard is roughly in the middle of the United States with major railway networks capable of distributing the newspaper or blue books nationwide. This was why Wayland had set up his *Appeal to Reason* weekly paper in Girard in the first place. However the post office was the means of dispatch. Haldeman-Julius therefore had to be careful not to print items that the postal services might consider illegal. Mostly Haldeman-Julius kept within the law, but every now and again he miscalculated.

John J. Kiely, postmaster of New York, acted within his rights when he recently pronounced two issues of the American Freeman, a Haldeman-Julius publication, unmailable because of an allegedly inflammatory article which appeared in both issues, Federal Judge Robert P. Patterson, decided yesterday. (NYT, 1932, p. 22)

Geography, politics, finance and relationships all had to be balanced to achieve success. The numerous variations in the little blue books can probably all be explained in terms of 'ad hoc' decisions by Haldeman-Julius to achieve some minor improvement in profit.

A few very rough hints will be provided to date the books, but accurate dating is difficult as there are many exceptions. Generally the books with the lowest numbers are the earliest, but when books did not sell enough copies, they were replaced with other titles and the numbers recycled, so there are often several titles with the same numbers. A brief look at the cover of the book helps to establish how old the book is. Initially the covers of little blue books were usually printed on blue card and this card has faded, sometimes leaving the book a light yellowy-brown and sometimes a pale grey. The inside pages were printed on poor quality paper which tends to become more brittle with age, so the books have to be treated with some care. The books are of a small size (8.5 x 12.5 cms or 3.4 x 5 ins) There is some variation in the size of little blue books but it is not significant or consistent.



Picture from http://cgi.ebay.com/Lot-of-18-HALDEMAN-JULIUS-LITTLE-BLUE-BOOK_W0QQitemZ7020819627QQcategoryZ29223QQrdZ1QQcmdZViewItem

Early little blue books are held together with two staples, whereas little blue books printed after about 1939 have only one staple. The use of drawings/photos for the outer cover also indicates a post 1940 printing. Some little blue books have a large circular device apparently depicting the world reading a book as well as the inscription 'A university in print: read the world over' on front or back covers in various colours with or without the cartoon image of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius. Not all little blue books have these devices, but they seem fairly common and they were used after 1945. All these features and many more besides help to date these books.

The changes to the little blue books which were evidenced by title, number of pages, printing font, colour of cover or symbols on the cover were in fact superficial, though they provide interest for the avid collector. The reality is that the changes were driven by other imperatives; these drivers were finance and his relationship with his wife Marcet. This relationship was also affected by finance, since she had a fortune, which over the years she made over to him in response to various crises. But for much of their marriage the relationship was stormy (NYT, 1933, p. 48). From 1919 to 1929, the business prospered. The lower he made the price of the little blue books the more money he made.

In October 1929, Haldeman-Julius was in New York and boastfully cabled home that he had made \$200,000 on the stock market (Haldeman-Julius, 1981-2, p. 12), but two days later he lost all his own and Marcet's investments in the Wall Street crash of 1929 as did many other Americans. He went back to Kansas and ran the business, facing one crisis after another. He had a number of money-making strategies. He continued to add to the variety of titles with little blue books and big blue books. He laid off staff, even including John Gunn who had been his loyal assistant for many years. He published anti-government material and asked his socialist colleagues to give him financial support against a government that he claimed was trying to close him down. He stood unsuccessfully as socialist candidate for the US Senate representing Kansas in 1932. He reneged on debts and promises to Marcet. In 1933 (a 1934 date given in other sources), Marcet and Emanuel were legally separated but they continued to live in the same house (URL: Kansas State Historical Society). He threatened to quit publishing altogether. However he kept going through the hard times and eventually pulled the business round. It was then the time of the second world war when supplies of paper were difficult. By the end of the war people's reading habits and expectations had changed; they wanted something better than little blue books. In 1941 Marcet died of cancer; a year later, Haldeman-Julius married his secretary Susan Haney (Herder, 1971). Emanuel and Marcet had two children, Alice and Henry: Henry continued the business after his father's death. He was permanently at loggerheads with the government, particularly the FBI and President Hoover. Titles such as # 1573. *Herbert Hoover--The Fatuous Failure in the White House* (Haldeman-Julius, n.d.) or #730 *FBI - Basis of an American Police State* (Bennett, n.d.) will not have endeared him to powerful men in the USA. Summonses on charges of tax evasion dogged him over the last years of his life, with the threat of prison becoming imminent just prior to his body being found in his own swimming pool in 1951 (NYT, 1951, p. 24).

The printery continued under his son, Henry Haldeman, but he mainly sold existing stock. Even then legal troubles were not over and Henry was sentenced to eighteen months' gaol for selling obscene literature (Janson, 1964, p. 84). Finally, the story of the little blue books came to an end on 4 July 1978, when the warehouse burnt down. Evidently the cause was just a stray firework; today there is only a field where the printing presses used to churn out little blue books day and night.

Big Blue books

Big blue books have dimensions of 8x5.5 inches or 21x13.5 cms. Big blue books were produced with a variety of numbers of pages; they usually sold for 25 cents and were in

general a more up-market product. The quality of the paper is similar to that of little blue books and like them the paper is now becoming brittle and yellow and the cardboard covers are frequently failing too. About one thousand big blue book titles were produced. The content of these books is generally educational, but many more medical/sexual topics are presented and are treated in greater detail than in the little blue books. The big blue books contain fewer literary works than the little blue books. The authors were as varied as those who worked on the little blue books; there were some new authors, but they were mainly chosen from Haldeman-Julius's band of friends who were socialist in politics and able to produce copy on time.

Some big blue books are numbered and some are not numbered; altogether there are about one thousand different titles. Additionally there are many thematic series, such as the *ABC library of living knowledge*, *The American freeman* (newspaper), *The Appeal to Reason library*, *The black international series*, *The critic and guide*, *The debunker and The debunker and the American parade*, fillers, *Freeman cartoons*, *The freethinkers library*, *Haldeman-Julius news-letter*, *Haldeman-Julius monthly*, *Haldeman-Julius quarterly*, *Haldeman-Julius weekly* (newspaper), *The how to series*, *The Joseph McCabe magazine*, *The key to culture series*, *The key to evolution series*, *The key to love and sex*, *Know thyself*, *The liberty encyclopedia*, *Life and letters*, *The militant atheist* (newspaper), *The notes and comments series*, *The question and answer series*, *Reviewers library*, *The true story of the Roman Catholic church*, *Abraham Walkowitz books of art* (8 1/2 x 11), *Weavers of words* and *Wisdom of life*.

Why did Haldeman-Julius produce this huge number of titles? Firstly not all of the titles were produced at the same time. Many simply changed title and went on much as before with a new title. Some were reference works, which stayed the same, but provided additional titles for sale. The key was always that the titles had to sell. If they did not sell, no more were printed. Broadly speaking these titles can be divided into encyclopaedias and reference works with an educational agenda and titles with idiosyncratic views and comment containing articles of general interest, which are of perhaps less certain educational value. Some of these he wrote, edited and published entirely on his own. Similarly his publishing colleague, Joseph McCabe, also produced enormous numbers of titles. Each of them was capable of writing well, but much of their output was dull and repetitive.

Haldeman-Julius as an educator

Even though Haldeman-Julius claimed the idea of printing cheap educative books as his own, other sources credit Marian Wharton with the idea. For example, Salmonson writing at the Violetbooks web site states that the idea of books to provide culture to the masses evidently came from the Principal of the People's College of Fort Scott.

Socialist reformers Marcet & Emanuel Haldeman-Julius wanted to bring education & literature to the masses, & succeeded. The idea for the press was originally that of Marian Wharton, headmistress of the People's College of Fort Scott. All 'commies' of course. Wharton talked Emanuel into the idea of high

literature cheap enough for the lower classes. Her college was the first major client purchasing the books. (Salmonson, 2001)

DeGruson (1932-1997) was the long time Curator of the Special Collection at the Axe Library, which includes Haldeman-Julius publications, with an expert knowledge of Kansas issues. His views about the inception of little blue books are likely to be sound. In an interview with Jim Kelly, he states that:

It was at the request of Marianne Horton [sic; Marian Wharton], the head of the English Department, of the People's College in Fort Scott for an inexpensive textbook that Haldeman-Julius started The Little Blue Books. And so, the first Little Blue Books consisted of not only socialist tracks, but of literary works as well. And all of these to be used at the People's College in Fort Scott, KS. Haldeman-Julius then advertised the Little Blue Books in the Haldeman-Julius Weekly, and was astounded at the response because hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of people sent in their \$5.00 for the first fifty titles to be published there. And so that was the beginning of a new career.
(URL: Jim Kelly)

It is probably not significant whose original idea it was, but there is a tendency to omit Marian Wharton from the picture altogether. A recent article gives details of her life story with an emphasis on her English textbook, *Plain English* (Greer, 1999), but the connection between Marian Wharton and *Little Blue Books* is not made. But there are many possible connections. For example, Eugene Debs was the first Chancellor of the People's College, Fort Scott (Greer, 1999, p. 252) and Debs was also one of Haldeman-Julius's socialist friends. Also, Fort Scott and Girard are geographically only about fifty kilometres apart. *Plain English* was the text for the first course at the People's College, Fort Scott, and cost \$12.50 (Greer, 1999, p. 259). This is the cost at a not-for-profit correspondence college and exceptionally cheap; another college charged \$50.00 for a similar introductory English course (Greer, 1999, p. 2571, note 9). If the claims of Haldeman-Julius are taken seriously, the whole secondary school curriculum was available for less than \$3.00. Theoretically this made education available to anyone who could read, or was it an illusion?

Perhaps from this distance in time, it is easy to regard Haldeman-Julius as just another fraud and huckster taking advantage of the uneducated poor. Much of the rest of this paper examines this issue. How much of Haldeman-Julius's opus was fraud, how much was self-delusion and how much was of service to the poor of America in the era 1920-1950?

Eventually sixty of the key little blue books focusing on self-education, including those on chemistry, physics and biology, were sold as a complete lot for schools; these thus acted as a complete curriculum. According to the advertisement in Appendix 1, they were sold as a 'High School Education Course' at \$2.98 for the pack of sixty books. According to the advertisement which was extracted from a big blue book (Haldeman-Julius, M., 1931), some 250,000 sets of sixty books had already been sold prior to 1931. Education

was good business for Haldeman-Julius. Evidently anything over 3.3 cents a book was profit for him, so at a slight discount on five cents a copy he made excellent profits from his concern for education.

The advertisement (Appendix 1) makes the following claims about the 'High School Education Course', which sold complete at \$2.98:

- i. It is entirely self-teaching and no instructor is necessary.
- ii. Every book is written, so that you can understand it easily.
- iii. You can begin anywhere and read or study any book at your convenience.
- iv. Each subject is complete in itself.
- v. With determination and application, you can secure the essentials of a high school education.

Most people, who have attempted study on their own, will have doubts about each of these claims, though there are individuals who might benefit from using little blue books as a course of study. The authors of the little blue books had no training in writing and there is no consistency between the authors in terms of style or approach. Initially there was no overall plan to produce a set of high school materials. When writing these books, the aim of the author was not to provide a structured set of materials, but rather to complete thirty-two pages of text to interest the general reader, a task to be completed in a short period of time, for which the author would receive about \$50. The claims are definitely 'hype' but may contain some germ of truth. For example, writing in 1923, Haldeman-Julius states that 'The use of the pocket series as a help in classroom teaching has been tested by M. L. Croom of the Fayette Business Centre' (Haldeman-Julius, 1923b).

He also stated, though this may be more hyperbole than fact, that:

One thing I hope to do through my 'University in Print' is to correct the false standards of education in America . . . Why do American people spend so much on an education that does not educate? . . . The 'UIP' will be truly educational in that it will cover the entire field of knowledge. It will disseminate practical information of the most valuable kinds: but it will inspire a vital change in the lives of its students – through the printed page carrying the results of our research in Girard to students old and young, poor and rich, busy and leisured in every quarter of the globe. (Haldeman-Julius, 1923a)

So perhaps he had some basis for his educational claims. Because of the large numbers produced, the books on the 'High School Education Course' list are still very common, so can usually be purchased very cheaply. In considering the economics of education at the time, Haldeman-Julius (1928, p.39) said that:

Little Blue Books have from the beginning emphasized education in their policy. The series is known far and wide as the University in Print. The strongest part of the editorial policy has been, especially in recent years, the endeavor to add

to the series a greater number of educational works . . . I do not print these educational books because I think the public ought to read them but because there is a tremendous demand for them. (Haldeman-Julius, 1928, p. 39)

He referred to his Little Blue Books as a ‘University in Print’ or sometimes as ‘college education on a three-foot shelf’. He advertised his books as educational within his catalogs as self-education and self-help, with another group of fifty books being a separate series ‘The self educator’ written by Joseph McCabe.

All that remains of Haldeman-Julius’s legacy are his blue books (little and big). His dream was wider than that; in the period of his greatest success and expansion, he planned to build a university at Girard. His books provided ‘A university in print: read the world over’ and this motto with an icon of a bespectacled world reading a little blue book adorns the back of many of them, sometimes accompanied by a caricature of Haldeman-Julius himself. In 1923, Haldeman-Julius (1923c) announced that he planned to build a modern university at Girard and the same edition of *Life and Letters* featured the photograph of a model design. The idea had the partial purpose of interesting academics in his ideas and persuading them to write for him and several of the little blue book writers were academics who had been intrigued by his plans and perhaps thought they might become faculty of the ‘University in Print’. The project never eventuated; but he did attract academics, a number of whom became his dedicated writers.

A slightly different picture emerges when one looks at the quality of the educational product being sold. Palmer (2003) commented, in particular, on the four chemistry titles in the series, noting the lack of a continuous structure between the four books, with the result that there was repetition of some chemical concepts and omission of others, as compared with the standard chemistry texts of the times. Additionally the books went unchanged for over thirty years, so that, for example, the discovery of the neutron in 1932, which was included in most texts published or edited after that date, was never corrected in little blue books; post 1932 little blue books thus give an incorrect picture of atomic structure.

Nonetheless one must assume that some students, whether in high school or as adults, must have found the freedom of choice and the escape from the schoolroom atmosphere with its tinge of compulsion a factor that motivated them for study (Haldeman-Julius, 1928, p. 38). Overall, in spite of their numerous flaws, it will be asserted that Haldeman-Julius’s publications benefited public education in America both in terms of a public understanding of science and improving the overall cultural milieu.

Haldeman-Julius, science and culture

Evidence of Haldeman-Julius’s educational role can also be found in the personal testimony from those who said that little blue books helped them to achieve an education. The following examples have been chosen from a large number of such reminiscences.

There is the autobiography of Ralph Ellison of whom it is said ‘Ralph Ellison is recognized nationally and internationally as one of America's most prominent literary personalities’ (Andrews, Smith Foster, & Harris, 2001):

He [Ralph Ellison] also read with pleasure the Haldeman Julius Blue Books, inexpensive forerunners of present-day paperbacks, small books with uniform blue paper covers, whose contents ranged from Shakespeare to Nietzsche, and from Oriental epic to contemporary humor. (Ellison, 1963)

Herman Wouk probably recalls little blue books from his own youth, though the reference is taken from a work of fiction:

We had in our flat a shelf of the Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books, which Aunt Faiga had bought to improve her mind. A few readers in their dotage, like me, will recall these booklets. (Wouk, 1995, p.250)

A prison inmate sent a note with the following explanation (Wyden, 1948, quoted Schocket, 2002):

You haven't had an order from me in six months because I've been in jail for running a still in Tennessee. When I got sentenced, the jury crowded around and the judge said, ‘that's the finest bit of coppersmithing I've ever seen’. And I owe it all to the Little Blue Books. (Wyden 1948, 63)

The author of novels set in the western United States, L'Amour (1990, pp. 9-10), wrote in his autobiography:

Riding a freight train out of El Paso, I had my first contact with little blue books. Another hobo was reading one and when he finished he gave it to me. The little blue books were a godsend to wandering men and no doubt to many others . . . In subsequent years, I read several hundred little blue books including books by Thomas Paine, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Hardy. (L'Amour, 1990, pp. 9-10).

L'Amour's memory is incorrect here, in that no little blue book was written by Charles Darwin, though there is a brief biography of him in one little blue book and several little blue books on evolution are available. Evolution was one of Haldeman Julius's favourite themes. However, L 'Amour and numerous other poor Americans during the depression saw little blue books as being the means of their own self-education which would lift the them out of poverty. The evidence is that they did provide some people with a start to self-education.

Haldeman-Julius; his authors' success

One interesting aspect of Haldeman-Julius's life was the amount he contributed to the artistic and scientific culture of America, in presenting Americans with classical authors and discovering new authors, or giving little known names a chance to shine. There are many examples of the eventual success of authors who achieved their initial success

through writing little blue books. For example, Haldeman Julius gave Will Durrant a chance to start his career as an author.

In 1917, with the publication of his first book, *Philosophy and the Social Problem*, Will received his Ph.D. At this time he was also lecturing at a local Presbyterian church on the history of philosophy, literature, music, art, and science. It was through these lectures that he met the publisher E. Haldeman-Julius, who coaxed him into writing one and eventually eleven short books on philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. (American Humanist Association, 2005)

Haldeman-Julius also seems to have provided W. E. B. du Bois (du Bois, 1930a; 1930b) with an opportunity to write two little blue books (#1505 and #1552) in 1930. W. E. B. du Bois was born in 1868 and died in 1963; he was an American civil-rights leader and author. The Haldeman-Julius books gave him the opportunity to become more widely known. Both Marcet and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius were very supportive of Afro-American causes.

Joseph McCabe was a writer and philosopher from Britain, whose productivity was greatly increased through his cooperation with Haldeman-Julius. He supported himself through his lectures and writing and was prolific. McLemee states that:

As author, editor, and translator, he produced a small library's worth of books on science, history, literature, philosophy, and cultural commentary – the equivalent of five large volumes per year for most of the remaining decades of his life. (McLemee, 2005, p.14)

Similarly Vance Randolph was one of Haldeman-Julius's finds. Randolph spent many years ghostwriting and producing pseudonymous works for the Haldeman-Julius 'Little Blue Book' series (URL: Randolph, Vance, 1892-1980). He worked under several different names and produced a number of little blue and big blue books gaining a major reputation for knowledge of the Ozarks, its folklore and its music.

Palmer (1995) wrote about one of the less prolific of Haldeman-Julius's writers called Gaylord Dubois, who wrote little blue books about cookery and learning French and Spanish. His blue book experience got him through hard times and he then worked for fifty years churning out Tarzan and Lone Ranger comics and many similar titles, finally turning to writing poetry. His whole life was an excellent example of self-education.

Conclusion

In spite of Emanuel Haldeman-Julius's many failings, he worked extremely hard to produce a large body of publications that was available to the poor of America in the depression era. Many are grateful to him for that. The books that were produced were flawed in terms of the quality of the product. As Americans became more prosperous, the little blue books were no longer sufficiently attractive; their inability to adapt to the new

situation led to the end of this publishing experiment. As a believer in evolutionary theory, Haldeman-Julius should have foreseen that outcome.

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